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A wali's quest for guidance

The Islamic genealogies of the *Seh Mlaya*

VERENA MEYER

ABSTRACT

The *Seh Mlaya* is a narrative tradition of Sunan Kalijaga's conversion and becoming a *wali* that is well-known for its drawing on pre-Islamic narrative and discursive legacies. In this article, I explore the Islamic genealogies of the narrative as told in a Surakarta manuscript (RP 333). I argue that the author uses the verse narrative to articulate two prominent, yet seemingly opposed, intellectual and spiritual traditions in Islamic Java and the relation between them: the speculative and ecstatic teachings of the Sufi lineage of the Syattariyah on the one hand, and Ghazālī's work with its emphasis on obedience and the purification of the soul on the other. Sunan Kalijaga's quest narratively holds together these two currents and even gestures at a transcendence of their difference as Sunan Kalijaga's efforts, even as they fail, lead to his realization of guidance.

KEYWORDS

Al-Ghazālī; asceticism; paradox; Syattariyah; *wali sanga*.

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INTRODUCTION¹

The *Seh Mlaya* is one version of the story of Sunan Kalijaga, a Javanese *wali* who is well known, even beyond the fields of Southeast Asian Islam or Javanese literature. Sunan Kalijaga is one of the *wali sanga* who, according to tradition, converted the Javanese to Islam by skilfully making use of Javanese aesthetic forms and cultural institutions. Scholarship on the narratives around Sunan Kalijaga has traditionally focused on the characteristic “Javaneseness” of the character, on how he embodies a synthesis between pre-Islamic spirituality and Islam. Geertz famously called Sunan Kalijaga a “symbol that connects Indic Java with Muslim Java” (Geertz 1968: 35). Similarly, Ricklefs considered the religious traditions represented by figures like Sunan Kalijaga to be a “mystic synthesis” (2006). The narrativization of Sunan Kalijaga’s story in the *Seh Mlaya* makes particularly evident certain narrative and aesthetic continuities between pre-Islamic and Islamic Java, as it narrates Sunan Kalijaga’s path to becoming a *wali* by grafting it onto the pre-Islamic *Dewa Ruci* narrative, with the narrative structure and symbolism of the originally Hindu-Buddhist text staying mostly intact.² As it crosses religions, the *Seh Mlaya* narrative has proved to be a productive point of inquiry into the ways in which Javanese Muslims appropriated pre-Islamic aesthetic forms and integrated them into a new religious framework (Arps 2011; Quinn 2018). In this article, I will pursue a related line of inquiry by tracing the specifically Islamic genealogical connections from the context of a version of the *Seh Mlaya*. This affords us the opportunity to reflect on how the Javanese authors, compilers, and readers may have situated themselves within the Islamic history of which their literary work was a part.

I will approach the question of Sunan Kalijaga’s Islamic genealogies through an episode narrated in one canto of a poem written in *macapat* verse titled *Cariyosipun Seh Mlaya, awit kala dereng juměňňg wali* (‘The story of Seh Mlaya, beginning at the time when he was not yet a *wali*’). This version of the *Seh Mlaya* is part of a larger compilation of a Surakarta Manuscript, RP 333, entitled *Sěrat suluk warna-warni tuwin wirid Syattariyah* (‘Book of

¹ I am grateful to Els Bogaerts and Tony Day for inviting me to contribute to this special issue and for all their help and patient assistance throughout the whole process. The initial research for this article was conducted at the Israel Institute of Advanced Studies, which provided an ideal situation for pursuing these questions. Special thanks also to Yosephin Apriastuti Rahayu and to Nancy Florida for their invaluable help with the translation, and to Edwin Wieringa for reading the article closely and providing thoughtful comments. Finally, many thanks to the two anonymous reviewers.

² Based on the *Mahābhārata* but Javanese in origin, the *Dewa Ruci* tells the story of Bima, one of the Pandawa brothers, on his quest for the water of life. In the process of his search, he finds Dewa Ruci, a miniature replica of himself, who invites Bima to enter him through his ear. Inside, Bima finds an immense ocean and sees different colours, receives teachings about their meaning, and attains mystical realization. Around the late eighteenth century, the *Dewa Ruci* was reworked into a Sufi text in modern Javanese poetry. The *Seh Mlaya* intensifies this Islamization of the text, as Bima is replaced by Sunan Kalijaga, and Dewa Ruci is substituted by Kilir, the Javanese name of Khidr, God’s mysterious friend whose encounter with Nabī Mūsā is told in the Qur’anic Surah of the Cave (18:65-82).

various mystical poems and Syattariyah teachings') (see illustration 1). This compilation comprises 29 texts that can be traced back to different authors and was inscribed in Surakarta in 1864 for K.G.P.H. Cakradiningrat by R. Panji Jayaasmara.³ The compilation's title references the Sufi lineage or *tarekat* (A. *ṭarīqah*) of the Syattariyah (A. Shattāriyah),⁴ pointing to one of the Islamic genealogies of this text and the compilation of which it is a part. Following the transcription and translation of a passage of the *Cariyosipun Seh Mlaya*, I will discuss the Syattariyah Sufi lineage as one of the text's intellectual and spiritual strands that point to the text's Islamic intellectual and textual genealogies; a second one is the theological thought of the medieval Islamic theologian al-Ghazālī (d. 1111). By exploring these strands that were both very influential in Southeast Asian Islam, I locate the text in the context of wider trends in Islamic literature and their transmission to the region, especially Java.



Illustration 1. MS RP 333, p. 221-222. (Photograph courtesy of Nancy Florida, with permission of the Radya Pustaka Museum).

³ MS Museum Radya Pustaka (RP 333: 217-287). See Florida (2012: 240-245) for a description of this MS and the *suluk* it comprises. According to Florida (p. 244), either K.G.P.H. Cakradiningrat or R. Panji Jayaasmara was likely the author of this poem.

⁴ Although the *Cariyosipun Seh Mlaya* is probably not one of them, many of the texts that are part of this compilation were authored by Mas Ngabehi Ronggasasmita who was initiated into the Syattariyah and provides his *silsilah* or intellectual genealogy or lineage of initiation in his texts. On his engagement with and articulation of Syattariyah teachings, see Florida (2019).

CANTO 2 (RP 333: 222-227)

Asmaradana (This meter conveys a mood of longing or passionate love; the metric structure is 8i-8a-8e/o-8a-7a-8u-8a.)

1. *Sang yogi ngandika aris
jĕnĕnga sira Seh Mlaya
sira mlaya ing maune
Seh Siniyan ing hyang suksma
dene ta sira kĕlar
tan mangan kongsi satahun
tondha kalilan katĕkan*

1. The revered teacher⁵ said softly:
“Your name shall be Seh Mlaya.
You were running [*mlaya*] then.⁶
Seh: Beloved by Hyang Suksma⁷
as you have been capable of
not eating for one year
a sign you are permitted to succeed.”

2. *Puruhita wus alami
tan antuk tuduh wĕkasan
mung nglakoni tapa bae
pan anggung kinen atapa
dhatĕng Susunan Benang
kinen tĕngga gurda agung
sataun tan kesah-kesah*

2. Having already studied at length,
receiving no ultimate direction,
doing nothing but austerities,
because ordered to constantly do austerities
by Susunan Benang,
ordered to guard the great banyan tree,⁸
one year without moving.

3. *Aneng tĕngahing wanadri
denya tĕngga kajĕng gurda
pan sawarsa ing lamine
anulya kinen ngaluwat
pinĕndhĕm tĕngah wana
sataun nuli dhinudhuk
dhatĕng Jĕng Susunan Benang*

3. In the middle of the mountainous forest
he guarded the banyan tree
for one year in length.
Then he was ordered to entomb himself,
to be buried in the middle of the forest
for one year; then he was dug up
by Jĕng⁹ Susunan Benang.

⁵ The revered teacher is Sunan Benang (also often called Bonang), whose encounter with Seh Mlaya is related in the poem's first canto. After Seh Mlaya's failed attempt at robbing Sunan Benang, thwarted by the latter's spiritual prowess, Seh Mlaya repents of his criminal ways and decides to become Sunan Benang's devoted student (RP 333: 219-221). The Javanese expression *sang yogi* literally denotes a practitioner of yoga, and hence an ascetic, but has in this context been stripped of its pre-Islamic meaning.

⁶ This is a reference to the preceding canto, where Seh Mlaya tries to run away after the failed robbery but is intercepted by Sunan Benang (RP 333: 220). *Mlaya* could also be translated 'roaming' or 'traveling' in reference to Seh Mlaya's past as a wandering highwayman. See Sunyoto (2016: 265) for an alternative etymology of his name, according to which it was passed down from his father.

⁷ *Hyang* is an originally pre-Islamic title of a deity which, in Islamic Java, was used as a title for Allah. *Hyang Suksma*, 'The Immaterial', belongs to a series of names of God in Old Javanese (Zoetmulder 1982: 1139). See Aciri (2011) for a more detailed discussion of divine names in Old Javanese.

⁸ Having repented and voiced his intention to become Sunan Benang's student, Seh Mlaya is ordered to guard Sunan Benang's staff, the weapon with which he was defeated as he attacked Sunan Benang (RP 333: 221-222). It is implied, and explicitly stated in other versions of the story, that the staff then grows into a banyan tree.

⁹ The Javanese term *Jĕng* or *Kangjĕng* is an honorific that often denotes royalty. In the religious context, it can also designate a Prophet or *wali*.

4. Anulya kinen angalih
pitêkur neng Kalijaga
mila aran kakasiye
sawarsa tan kēna nendra
utawi yen dhahara
tinilar mring Mēkah sampun
dhatēng Jēng Susunan Benang

4. Then he was ordered to move,
to meditate at the River Jaga,
wherefore he was given his name.
One year he was not allowed to sleep
or eat.
He was left behind when to Mecca went
Jēng Susunan Benang.

5. Apan wus jangkēp sawarsi
Seh Mlaya gya tinilikan
pinanggih pitêkur bae
Jēng Susunan angandika
heh Jēbeng luwarana
jēnēnga wali sireku
panutup panatagama

5. Because one year had already elapsed,
before long he paid a visit to Seh Mlaya,
finding him sunk in meditation.
Jēng Susunan said:
“Aye, young man, be released.
You shall be called a *wali*
the seal of the religious commanders.

6. Den-bēcik agamaneki
agama pan tata krama
krama kramating hyang manon
yen sira mranata sarak
sareh ngiman hidayat
hidayat iku hyang agung
agung ing nugrahanira

6. Do well in your practice of religion
for religion is rules of proper conduct,
the rules by the grace of the All-Seeing.¹⁰
If you command religious laws,
all the laws of faith and guidance,
the guidance is God the Greatest,¹¹
most great in bestowing His blessings.

7. Kanugrahan ing Hyang Widdhi
ambawani kasudibyan
lan pangucap apa dene
kadigdayan kaprawiran
kabeh rehing ayuda
tan liya nugraha luhur
utamaning kautaman

7. The blessings of God Almighty¹²
grant excellence at battle,
and speech as well as
magical powers and courage.
All things concerned with war
are none other than the blessings from the Exalted,
the most virtuous of virtues.

8. Utamanira Ki Bayi
den-awas kang sēdya murba
kang amurba ing dheweke
wasesaning aneng sira
sira tan darbe purba
sira kapurba Hyang Agung
den-mantēp kang panarima

8. The greatest virtue for you, Master:¹³
Be mindful of Him who always holds authority,
the One who has authority over you.
It is His power that is in you.
You have no authority.
You are authored by God the Greatest.
Be firm in your acceptance.”

¹⁰ *Hyang Manon* is another pre-Islamic name for God. *Manon* translates as ‘Witness’ or ‘All-Seeing’.

¹¹ *Hyang Agung*, ‘The Great’ or ‘The Exalted,’ is also an originally pre-Islamic designation of God. Note that the term *agung* is repeated in the next line, likely in allusion to the Arabic designation of God as *al-Rahmān al-Raḥīm*, where both expressions mean ‘merciful.’ I am grateful to Edwin Wieringa for pointing this allusion out to me.

¹² *Hyang Wid[hi]ji* is another originally pre-Islamic name of God that became naturalised into Islamic texts.

¹³ *Ki Bayi*, translated here as ‘Master,’ is derived from an Old Javanese designation of a temple functionary (Florida 1995: 220 n. 5). It is also possible that *bayi*, which means ‘baby,’ is in

9. *Seh Mlaya umatur aris
kalangkung nuwun patikbra
Kalijaga tur sĕmbahe
nanging hamba matur tuwan
anuwun babar pisan
sajatine suksma luhur
kang wasta iman hidayat*

9. Seh Mlaya said softly:
"I, your servant, am very grateful."
Kalijaga offered his reverence.
"But your servant says to you, lord:
I ask for all of it:
The truth of the Most High
that is called faith and guidance.

10. *Kang mantĕp panrimaneki
ingkang pundi sanyatanya
kula suwun samĕloke
yen namunga basa swara
hamba manut kumandhang
yen pralina anglir kukus
tanpa karya olah sarak*

10. That which I am to accept firmly,
what is it in truth?
I ask for complete clarification.
If they are mere words and sounds¹⁴
your servant will be chasing an echo.
If I die, I'll be like smoke,
useless, my practice of religious laws."

11. *Sunan Benang ngandika ris
ya Seh Mlaya bĕnĕr sira
nanging sapanĕmuningong
ingkang aran panarima
elinga mring kang karya
duk lagya kamulanipun
apan datan kadya mega*

11. Sunan Benang said softly:
"Yes Seh Mlaya, you are right,
but in my opinion
what is acceptance is:
Remember Him who created
in the beginning
for it was not like a cloud.

12. *Pan kadya hidayat ĕning
warnaning iman hidayat
iya katon sabĕnĕre
Seh Malaya wruhanira
tan kĕna duga-duga
utawa yen sira bĕstu
kalawan netra kapala*

12. It was like guidance, clear.
The manifestation of belief and guidance,
indeed, is revealed in its truth.
Seh Malaya, know:
It must not be doubted
or realised¹⁵
by your phenomenal eye.

13. *Ingsun iki lir sireki
kapengin kang kaya sira
mring hidayat samĕloke
hidayat ingsun tan wikan
samĕlok dayatullah
mung warta kang ingsun gugu
jĕr iku andikaning hyang*

13. I myself was like you.
I wanted the same as you do:
Complete clarification of guidance.
Of guidance I do not know
with utmost clarity of God's guidance.
It is only messages that I obey,
after all they are the speech of God."

reference to Sunan Kalijaga's status as a novice.

¹⁴ A more idiomatic translation of *basa swara* into English here would be 'smoke and mirrors', but since the metaphor continues on in the next line with the image of 'chasing an echo', I have opted to stay closer to the Javanese in my translation.

¹⁵ These two lines could also be translated as 'Don't end up guessing or cast astray'. *Bĕstu* normally means 'realization'. However, elsewhere in RP 333 it appears in idiosyncratic usage, meaning the opposite of 'realization', 'being cast astray'. I am grateful to Nancy Florida for pointing this out to me.

14. *Umatu Susunan Kali
kawula nuwun jinatyān
punapa wontĕn wiyose
ingkang aran tanpa sipat
kang sipat tanpa aran
pan kawula nyuwun tuduh
anggen-anggen kang wĕkasan*

14. Susunan Kali spoke:
“I ask to have made manifest
what is the opening¹⁶
of a name without attributes
and an attribute without names?
I ask for instruction in
the ultimate means.”¹⁷

15. *Sunan Benang ngandika ris
yēn sira amrih wĕkasan
matenana rĕragane
sinauwa pĕjah sira
iya sajroning gĕsag
atapaa mring wanagung
aja kongsi kamanungsan*

15. Sunan Benang said softly:
“If you want to achieve the ultimate
kill your body
learn to die
indeed, in the midst of life.
Do austerities in the great forest.
Do not let anyone know.”¹⁸

16. *Wus tĕlas denya wawarti
Jĕng Sunan Benang gya jĕngkar
sangking ing Kalijagane
ngaler ngilen lampahira
antawis saonjotan
Seh Mlaya gya atut pungkur
malĕbeng ing wana wasa*

16. Having conveyed this message
Jĕng Sunan Benang promptly departed
Kalijaga,
wandering far and wide.
After some time
Seh Mlaya quickly followed his path,
entering the great forest.

17. *Pan angidang lampahneki
awor lan kidang manjangan
atanapi yēn asare
anĕnggih tumut anangsang
kadya turuning kidang
uyang-uyung nĕnggih tumut
pan kadya lakuning kidang*

17. He practiced acting like a deer¹⁹
mingling with the deer and stags
and when he slept
he indeed also dangled [his head]
like the sleeping deer.
Back and forth, he followed along
like the treading deer.

¹⁶ *Wiyos*, or ‘opening’/‘coming forth’, is likely a reference to the Arabic *fath*, one of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s terms for unveiling or opening up the reality of *wujūd* (see Chittick 1998: 244).

¹⁷ *Anggen-anggen* could either signify means or methods, or vestments. An alternative translation of these last two lines would thus be, ‘I ask for instruction/to be vested with the ultimate’.

¹⁸ This line is ambiguous in meaning. *Kamanungsan* can be translated either as ‘being caught’ or ‘being found out’, or as ‘to appear human’. With the second meaning, the line could be translated as, ‘Do not be like a human’.

¹⁹ The *tapa ngidang* (‘asceticism of acting like a deer’) is one of several ascetic practices that have likely been practiced in Java since before the advent of Islam. Other such practices include the *tapa ngalong* (‘asceticism of acting like a bat’), sitting in or hanging from a tree, or only eating fruit; *kungkum*, being submerged in water (*Kawruh Sawatawis* 1937).

18. *Yen ana jalma udani kang kidang lumayu gēbras Jěng Sunan tumut anggēbres dian lumayu burangkangan kadya playuning kidang uyang-uyung inggih tumut manut saparaning kidang*
18. If a human became aware of them²⁰ the deer fled quickly. Jěng Sunan joined their flight and ran on all fours like the running deer. Back and forth, he followed along following wherever the deer went.
19. *Ya ta wus jangkēp sawarsi Seh Malaya denya ngidang ya marēngi ing janjine wuwusēn Sinuhun Benang arsa salat mring Mēkah sakēdhap netra wus rawuh sabakdane salat pulang*
19. Indeed, one year had already passed, Seh Malaya living like a deer in accordance with his promise. It was said that Sinuhun Benang wanted to pray in Makkah. He arrived in the blink of an eye, after his prayer he went home.
20. *Kendēl munggeng ing wanadri mulat ing kidang lumajar dene sutane warni wong Sunan Benang emut ing tyas wontēn wali angidang Seh Mlaya ing wastanipun sigra wau pinar pēkan*
20. Halting in the mountainous forest, he saw a deer run by but its fawn was in the form of a man. Sunan Benang remembered in his heart there was a wali who lived like a deer, Seh Malaya was his name. Quickly he drew nearer.
21. *Seh Malaya nulya gēndring lumayu anunjang palang tan etung jurang pepereng binujung pan ora kēna jinaring lan kinala yen kēna kala marucut narajang jaring kaliwat*
21. Seh Malaya promptly fled, ran away in agitation not heeding ravines and slopes. Chased, he was not caught with a net or a rope. When struck by a rope, he slipped away, charging, the net missed him.
22. *Bramantyanira tan sipi susumbar sajroning nala majanani kidang kiye nguni insun nyēkēl barat sun dumuk datan lēpat kang lēmbut panora mrucut kang agal panora gagal*
22. His [Benang's] anger was extraordinary. Boastfully he thought to himself: "Infuriating is this deer! I used to seize the wind, with my slightest touch, I never missed. The soft wind did not slip through my hands with rough wind I never failed.

²⁰ An alternative reading could be: If a human came, the deer knew and fled quickly.

23. *Yen luput nyĕkĕl sireki
lĕhĕng aywa dadi jalma
wali wadad buh gawene*

*sigra mangsah Sunan Benang
pan sarwi nyipta sĕga
tigang kĕpĕl mapan sampun
kinarya durma bĕbalang*

23. If I fail to seize you
better if I had never been born a human."
The *wali* familiar with God's oneness²¹ was
uncertain what to do.

At once Sunan Benang advanced
while at the same time creating rice
three hands full ready in place
made into a weapon to hurl.²²

COMMENTARY

In this canto, the second canto of the poem, we meet Sunan Kalijaga, also known as Seh Mlaya, as he is becoming a *wali*. Sunan Kalijaga has already reformed from his old ways as a criminal after his first encounter with Sunan Benang and the latter's instruction to his new student that in order to do serious repentance, he needs to remain in place and wait for him. Sunan Kalijaga obeys his teacher, and by the time Sunan Benang returns, he can barely find his student: in the long time that elapsed since he left, trees have grown all around Sunan Kalijaga (see RP 333: 217-222). The passage at hand then begins right after Sunan Benang's return with his acknowledgement that Sunan Kalijaga has achieved the status of a *wali* and, indeed, the seal of the religious commanders,²³ thus pointing to the *wali's* level of perfection. He further tasks Sunan Kalijaga with the command over Islamic law, the law of belief (*iman*; A. *imān*) and guidance (*hidayat*; A. *hidāyah*). But Sunan Kalijaga is not satisfied. He asks Sunan Benang to explain to him the meaning of belief and God's guidance (*hidayatullah*) with utmost clarity. He furthermore asks him about a name without attributes and an attribute without names, which he calls instruction in the ultimate means. Sunan Benang, however, does not know. All he can do is impart the following advice to Sunan Kalijaga: if he wants to achieve true understanding, he needs to increase his austerities, to "kill his body", and learn to die.

This passage takes place before Sunan Kalijaga's encounter with Nabi Kilir (A. *Khidr*), at which point the narrative becomes grafted onto Bima's encounter with Dewa Ruci in the Old Javanese poem. But despite the fact that the passage at hand has no pre-Islamic narrative model, a casual glance

²¹ I understand the Javanese term *wadad* not as celibate, but as an adaptation of the Arabic *waḥdah*, oneness, in reference to the first grade of differentiation in a cosmology derived from Ibn al-'Arabī's theology (see Drewes 1968: 213 n. 4). I am grateful to Edwin Wieringa for pointing me to this reference.

²² This line could also be translated as, 'to be thrown once turned into *Durma*', referencing the meter of the following canto. *Durma* conveys an angry or violent mood and is appropriate for battle scenes (Florida 1995: 186).

²³ Sunan Kalijaga as the seal (J. *panutup*) of the religious commanders appears to echo Muhammad's title "Seal of the Prophets" (Q 33: 40), which has generally come to be understood to mean that Muhammad was the last prophet and that his message was final. Indicating the perfection of other orders, the term "seal" was adopted for designating authoritative figures, such as Ibn al-'Arabī as the seal of the Prophets (Chodkiewicz 2017) or the Javanese poet Ronggawarsita as the seal of the court poets (J. *pujongga*) (Florida 2019).

confirms strong reverberations of Java's pre-Islamic, Hindu-Buddhist heritage. Examples include the use of the honorific *sang yogi* for Sunan Benang or *puruhita* for Sunan Kalijaga, or *Hyang Suksma* and *Hyang Manon* as names of God. At the same time, the *wali's* quest and his desire for more knowledge and understanding is articulated in concepts that show the text's deep embeddedness in Islamic theology. In the following discussion of the above passage, I will identify and contextualize two strands that point to the text's Islamic intellectual and textual genealogies. I will focus first on Sunan Kalijaga's desire to achieve true understanding of God's guidance (*hidayat*), likely drawing on a Ghazālian concept with wide currency in Islamic Southeast Asia; and second, on Sunan Kalijaga's request for instruction in ultimate means, which, I suggest, is consistent with the thought and practice of the Syattariyah to which this compilation of texts connects itself. While accessible sources are scarce and this discussion will therefore remain exploratory, I wish to propose a way to read the *Seh Mlaya* as an Islamic text that builds on and narrativizes currents in Islamic thought and practice that have connected Java through intellectual and textual lineages with the wider Islamic world.

In the compilation of Sufi texts in RP 333, we also find, among other pieces of writing, a partial translation of al-Ghazālī's *Bidāyat al-Hidāyah* ('The Beginning of Guidance').²⁴ In one sense, the extended citation of Ghazālī's piece in translation in a compilation of Syattariyah doctrine and practice may seem like a mismatch, given that Ghazālī is not part of any Syattariyah genealogies.²⁵ What is more, Ghazālī is usually associated with a Sufism of "sobriety"²⁶ committed to the Ash'arī interpretation of *tawhīd*, God's oneness, that is suspicious of speculative or ecstatic Sufi orientations like the Syattariyah, ostensibly challenging the ontological difference between God and humans (Mayer 2008: 267). Ghazālī furthermore promoted a moderate asceticism that avoided extreme mortification, recommending instead a renunciation of worldly intentions and desires that led to *tawakkul*, entrusting one's soul and all of one's affairs to God (Gramlich 1984: 455-514; Gobillot 2012).

In another sense, the presence of Ghazālian teachings in this text is not surprising at all: Ghazālī's Sufism and his comprehensive exposition of the Islamic sciences in his magnum opus *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* ('The Revival of the Religious Sciences') was widely read and significantly influenced Islamic thought in Southeast Asia, especially after 'Abd al-Ṣamad al-Palimbānī (d. after 1788) transmitted Ghazālī's work into Malay.²⁷ These two texts, as

²⁴ This translation (RP 333: 446-471) is part of a treatise concerning various teachings, particularly pertaining to the Syattariyah. I am grateful to Nancy Florida for sharing her transcript of this passage with me.

²⁵ A list of the *silsilah* of Syattariyah initiates can be found in Fathurahman (2016). Note that all of these lineages go through Bisṭāmī (d.c. 874) known for his ecstatic Sufism.

²⁶ The archetypal sober Sufi was al-Junayd (d. 910), who advanced a Sufism rooted in Ash'arī theology. On the emergence of the drunkenness-sobriety typology in Sufism, see Mojaddedi (2003).

²⁷ 'Abd al-Samad al-Palimbānī transmitted *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* in the form of a free adaptation titled *Sayr al-Sālikīn ilā 'Ibādāt Rabb al-Ālamīn*; he also wrote a Malay adaptation of *Bidāyat al-Hidāyah* titled *Hidāyat al-Sālikīn fī Sulūk Maslak al-Muttaqīn* (Nasution et al. 1992: 33-35). Partial

well as other works by Ghazālī, have long been studied in the Archipelago's Islamic educational institutions, such as the Javanese *pēsantren*. Read both in Arabic and in translation into various vernacular languages, Ghazālī's texts especially dominated the curriculum on Sufism (Van Bruinessen 1990: 258). The thoughts articulated in these texts then mingled and interacted with other Islamic traditions, coexisting in thought and practice even if their theoretical relation sometimes looked tenuous, as was the case with Ghazālī's thought and Syattariyah teachings. It is difficult to know if the author of the *Seh Mlaya* or the compiler of the manuscript intended for the poem to reflect the teachings of the treatise as a whole, but the fact that the *Bidāyah* is found in this Syattariyah textbook at least invites us to consider what use a reader might make of the two of them together in relation to the poem.

Ghazālī's *Bidāyah* is a short treatise containing practical guidelines for the daily obligations of the devout Muslim. There are no comprehensive secondary sources discussing this text,²⁸ despite the fact that it has been and still is one of Ghazālī's most widely read books, with copies of the text and commentaries being abundant in libraries and collections across the Islamic world. It was written in connection with the *Ihyā'*, to which it corresponds in terms of content.²⁹ In the *Ihyā'*, Ghazālī undertakes a comprehensive exploration of religious life to provide guidance for the devout. Crucially, Ghazālī does not consider the knowledge conveyed in this work to be an end in itself, but rather as serving a soteriological agenda. He exhorts the reader to interrogate all aspects of their daily affairs and activities as to whether they are beneficial for the attainment of salvation, to cultivate those that are, and to shun those that are not. In the same vein, the *Bidāyah* examines the value and meaning of certain daily activities while setting up as ideal certain religious or ritual practices and particular types of social relationships. The Javanese translation in RP 333 corresponds to the introduction and about the first half of the practical guidelines in Ghazālī's text (Watt 1953: 90-111; al-Ghazālī 2010: 16-54). It enjoins readers to be obedient and meticulous in their performance of their everyday duties and covers mundane and sometimes base matters, including even a passage on the etiquette of using the lavatory. Throughout the book, the emphasis is on correct performance rather than inner meaning. Indeed, in a passage with advice on how to make the best use of one's time during the morning hours, Ghazālī singles out seeking useful knowledge as the best and most beneficial way to spend one's time; but, he continues, for those unable to do so, it is also beneficial for one's spiritual well-being to serve those whose intellectual potential is superior.

When Sunan Kalijaga asks Sunan Benang for guidance, his teacher tells him to stay in place and wait for him to return. Sunan Kalijaga obeys and, in

Javanese translations of Ghazālī's work were also published and circulated, although they mostly seem to post-date RP 333 (see Van Bruinessen 1990: 258).

²⁸ There are, however, two translations into English, both of which include a short introduction in which work and author are contextualised (Watt 1953; al-Ghazālī 2010).

²⁹ I am grateful to Frank Griffel for sharing his notes on the *Bidāyah* with me (personal communication, 20-9-2019).

the process, becomes a pious Muslim and *wali*. While Geertz has pointed to the resemblance of his devotion to yogic practice, Sunan Kalijaga's unconditional obedience to his teacher could equally be conceptualized as an Islamic, and especially Sufi virtue. In Sufi lineages, the cultivation of piety must be pursued with the guidance of a teacher and is formalized through rituals of initiation and the novice's pledge of allegiance (*bay'ah*) to the master (Green 2012: 8-9). Ghazālī also emphasized the indispensability of obeying a teacher's every direction.³⁰ Furthermore, Sunan Benang's advice to intensify his asceticism echoes Ghazālī's exhortation to subject all daily routines to a discipline of conduct that is entirely devoted to and oriented toward God. Ghazālī's program in the *Bidāyah* is the mapping out of guidelines how to prepare in the novice, through rigorous disciplines, the hermeneutic setting within which further instruction and knowledge can be properly received and become spiritually beneficial.³¹ At the end of the text, Ghazālī concludes that only after having mastered this obedience and discipline, spiritual secrets and depths of understanding can be revealed to the faithful.³² But when Sunan Kalijaga asks Sunan Benang for such spiritual secrets after all of his outstanding acts of obedience to his teacher, the latter can only tell him to continue and even intensify his obedience. Guidance cannot be forced. Even for the most obedient, it cannot be guaranteed. Obedience is a good in itself, irrespective of its proximate consequences and irrespective even of whether the desire for knowledge and guidance will be fulfilled.

The Syattariyah tradition has a somewhat different approach to the knowledge of spiritual secrets. This Sufi lineage can be traced back to fifteenth century Persia, where it originated among ecstatic Sufis in the Bistāmī tradition. Its cosmology was based on an emanationist framework according to which the spiritual path of the Sufi begins with the consideration of God's essence as unchanging being. The Sufi participates in the descent from this point of departure via progressive stages to the phenomenal world. From Central Asia, the Syattariyah was transmitted to Mughal India by Shaykh 'Abdullah (d. 1485), who coined the name of the lineage and outlined the basic framework of the lineage's teachings and practices (Rizvi 1983: 151-53). The Syattariyah's most distinctive characteristics were then defined and promoted by Muḥammad Ghawth of Gwalior (d. 1562 or 1563) and some of his successors.³³ Reflecting the Bistāmī tradition to which he linked himself through his lineage of initiation, Ghawth's own spiritual path was characterized by ecstatic spiritual states

³⁰ Elsewhere in his work, Ghazālī even goes so far as to say that following a wrong direction is more beneficial than doing the right thing on one's own (see Gramlich 1984: 3). A similar emphasis on obedience has also been a hallmark of Java's traditionalist *pésantren*, where the *kyai* is in a position of absolute authority over his students (Dhofier 1999: 28).

³¹ For a more detailed analysis of the significance of ritual and social action for the path of the Sufi, see Lapidus (1984: 46-52).

³² See al-Ghazālī (2010: 152). For a more detailed discussion of this issue in the *Iḥyā'*, see Gramlich (1984: 284-286).

³³ For more on the Syattariyah in Mogul India, and especially on Muhammad Ghawth, see Ernst (1999) and Kugle (2003).

induced by asceticism and meditation. The dramatic climax of his spiritual life was his ascension to God's throne, a face-to-face meeting with the divine, and his realization of God's being (Kugle 2003). Due to his ecstatic utterances, he became the target of persecution, which seems to have deterred his successors from making comparable claims in public (Ernst 1999: 416-418). Nonetheless, the ascetic and meditative techniques recorded in Muḥammad Ghawth's work and his hagiographies were to have lasting influence on the Syattariyah's characteristic spiritual disciplines. In the seventeenth century, a follower of the Syattariyah translated one of Ghawth's treatises on spiritual disciplines into Arabic and thereby brought the lineage to Mecca and Medina. There, it was continued by prominent scholars, including Aḥmad al-Qushāshī (d. 1660) and Muḥammad al-Kūrānī (d. 1690). Both were adherents and transmitters of the thought of the Arab-Andalusian Sufi scholar Ibn al-'Arabī (d. 1240), according to whom all existence is derivative of *wujūd*, God's pure being.³⁴ Qushāshī and Kūrānī took up the Syattariyah tradition, articulated it in terms of Ibn al-'Arabī's theology, and initiated into it their students from around the world. One of their students was the renowned Sufi scholar 'Abd al-Ra'ūf al-Singkilī (d. c. 1693) from Aceh's west coast, who brought the Syattariyah back to the Malay world.³⁵ The lineage became firmly established not only in Sumatra,³⁶ but also at the royal courts of Java, including Surakarta, as is evidenced by RP 333 and other manuscripts.³⁷ Florida has recently demonstrated how different texts of RP 333 delineate an emanationist cosmology and certain spiritual practices based on this cosmology that are consistent with the longer tradition of Syattariyah teachings. Against this background, we can also consider to what extent certain Syattariyah tropes and ideas reverberate on the narrative level, revealing the worlds of speculative and ecstatic Sufism of which the Syattariyah was a part.

If the influence of Muḥammad Ghawth was a watershed moment in the definition of Syattariyah teachings, the stories around his life may also have left traces in the further development of the *tarekat*. In fact, Sunan Kalijaga's ascetic discipline strongly resonates with the articulation of Syattariyah practice in the narratives around the life of Ghawth and in his writings. While earlier Syattariyah Sufis in the Biṣṭāmī tradition had considered fast-paced methods to be distinct from and superior to the observance of the five pillars or hard ascetic exercises, Ghawth considered the perfection of ritual law and

³⁴ This intellectual tradition is often referenced with *waḥdat al-wujūd*, a term which I will avoid because it was not used by Ibn al-'Arabī himself and because of its association with a monism that does not do justice to the complexity of the thought of Ibn al-'Arabī and many of his successors, including the authors of RP 333.

³⁵ According to Johns (1978: 484), it was Kūrānī in particular who influenced 'Abd al-Ra'ūf and, with him, Islamic thought in seventeenth century Aceh, from where it contributed to shaping Islam elsewhere in Southeast Asia. More recently, Kūrānī's great influence on intellectual Islamic life in the seventeenth century has also been studied by El-Rouayheb (2015).

³⁶ For the development of the Syattariyah among the Minangkabau in West Sumatra, see Fathurahman (2008); for Aceh, see Fakhriati (2008).

³⁷ There has also been a Syattariyah presence at the royal court of Cirebon and surrounding *pēsantren* (see Muhaimin 2004: 343).

ascetic discipline to be a necessary precondition for the successful realization of the Syattariyah path (Rizvi 1983: 160). Ghawth's story of his own life and spiritual journey,³⁸ like the one of Sunan Kalijaga, particularly emphasizes strict asceticism and self-mortification. Like Sunan Kalijaga, Ghawth was told by his spiritual master to live in isolation. He moved to the mountains to cultivate his religious devotion and lived there for eight years, practicing rigorous asceticism and intense meditation while abstaining from sleep for extended periods of time. Still not satisfied, Ghawth increased his isolation and his spiritual disciplines, eating little or nothing (Kugle 2003: 9-12). Meanwhile, Sunan Kalijaga practiced the similarly rigorous spiritual discipline of living like a deer. Of course, the narrative theme of practicing intense asceticism to attain spiritual knowledge and realization is not specific to these two characters, or even the Syattariyah tradition. Sunan Kalijaga's story in RP 333 may not have been a conscious transmission of a Syattariyah predecessor into a Javanese context. But both his and Ghawth's story participate in a narrative framework shared by the Syattariyah lineage and other ecstatic Sufis that promote steadfast rigorous asceticism in spite of all frustrations and seeming failures in order to attain the highest possible knowledge.

There are further echoes of Muḥammad Ghawth and the Syattariyah in this version of the *Seh Mlaya*. Ghawth described the spiritual seeker's progress as the gradual realization that God is already present and within the seeker's own self and vice versa. In narrativizing this experience of self-transcendence, he brought into focus a central paradox of speculative Sufism: in realizing God's being, a subject experiences the dissolution of his own subjectivity, thus pointing to the simultaneous identity and non-identity of God and the cosmos. Sufi writers have employed different strategies to express this inexpressible truth.³⁹ As Ghawth narrated later, during his cosmic journey he had a vision of all the Divine names of Allah taking on distinct shapes and thus giving rise to the phenomenal world (Kugle 2003: 19-20). This vision resonates with Ibn al-ʿArabī's thought which, as I have shown above, became firmly integrated into Syattariyah thought with al-Kūrānī. According to Ibn al-ʿArabī, all things in the universe only exist through their participation in *wujūd* or God's pure being (Chittick 1989: 80). Attributes or names are the "isthmus" (*A. barzakh*) (35) between *wujūd* and the cosmos, since God's being could not become manifest if it were not for entities without independent being or attributes of their own (43). When Sunan Kalijaga asks for an "opening", he employs Ibn al-ʿArabī's terminology of the opening or unveiling (*A. fath*), which facilitates the realization of *wujūd* (Chittick 1998: 244-245), Sunan Kalijaga's "ultimate means". But Sunan Kalijaga goes even further: in asking about a "name without attributes" and an

³⁸ Ghawth recorded his spiritual experiences in the form of a first-person account. This text, originally written in Persian, is partially available in English translation (Kugle 2003).

³⁹ Drawing on a great wealth of examples, Ahmed (2016) has examined the centrality of paradox and metaphor in Islamic theological expressions. Paradox and ambiguity as a medium to communicate subtle truths also play a role in Southeast Asian texts, including other poems in RP 333 (see Florida 2019). For an extended discussion of ambiguity and paradox in Malay poetry, see Meyer (2019).

“attribute without names”, he strives to transcend even this isthmus, seeking instead an acquaintance with unmediated Being.

Sunan Kalijaga's quest for guidance thus seems to be framed in terms of concepts that are in a tenuous, potentially even contradictory, relationship to one another. On the one hand, guidance is framed as the “ultimate means”, esoteric knowledge of a name without attributes and an attribute without names. This echoes the spiritual traditions of the Syattariyah that had absorbed the metaphysical framework of Ibn al-‘Arabī. On the other hand, guidance as understood in Ghazālī's famous work is framed in the most mundane ways. He even discourages students from seeking advanced knowledge beyond their capacity, prioritizing instead the strict adherence to ritual law and etiquette, through which a gradual purification is achieved. Only when this is accomplished may certain spiritual secrets become apparent – or they may not.

While the coexistence of these two divergent theological idioms may look like a contradiction on paper, their combination is neither rare⁴⁰ nor specific to Java. Retracing the genealogical lineages outlined above, we already find such an integration of both Ghazālī and Ibn al-‘Arabī's thought in the work of ‘Abd al-Ra‘ūf's teacher al-Qushāshī, who drew heavily on Ghazālī in his *Al-Simt al-Majīd* (Fathurrahman 2008: 54-56). Similarly, ‘Abd al-Ra‘ūf's other Hijazi teacher and interlocutor al-Kūrānī performed the even more unlikely feat of assimilating not only Ghazālī's Sufism, but also Ḥanbalī traditionalism into Ibn al-‘Arabī's metaphysical framework (see Johns 1978: 481; El-Rouayheb 2015: 275-285). Later, when Palimbānī transmitted Ghazālī's *Iḥyā'* into the Malay language and context, he integrated elements of Ibn al-‘Arabī's thought into his adaptations of Ghazālī's work, without, as Van Bruinessen (1990: 258) noted, any noticeable awareness of conflict. According to Nasution et al. (1992: 34), in Palimbānī, these two orientations are considered complementary, with Ghazālī emphasizing the kinds of ethics and practice conducive to attaining the knowledge of Ibn al-‘Arabī's metaphysics. By combining these two dominant Sufi orientations in the poem, our poet thus followed a long lineage of Sufis and scholars who came before him and did the same.

And looking beyond the *Seh Mlaya*'s historical-textual predecessors to our narrative itself, it is perhaps fitting that Sunan Kalijaga – Geertz's supposed great synthesizer, the bridge between two civilizations – embodies here a different kind of synthesis or transcendence of difference. It is a difference which, with Shahab Ahmed (2016), we can recognize as a deployment of contradiction or paradox that is intrinsically Islamic and articulates complex meaning that transcends the limitations of discursive knowledge. This story portrays the *wali* as someone whose superiority becomes manifest through his submission, obedience, and seeming lowliness, living like a deer in the forest in order to understand the most fundamental of truths about God. Sunan Kalijaga also personifies the two intellectual and spiritual strands that have

⁴⁰ Feener (1998: 584) has shown that historically, the thought of both Ghazālī and Ibn al-‘Arabī constituted the two most influential currents in Southeast Asian Islam. Interactions between these two dominant orientations are therefore unsurprising.

been most influential in Javanese Sufism. Sunan Benang's advice to him is not unlike Ghazālī's advice to the spiritual seeker in *Bidāyat al-Hidāyah*, which is that spiritual discipline is a good in itself and precedes the mere possibility of understanding. Later in the poem, when Sunan Kalijaga, still not satisfied, follows Sunan Benang's last command to go on the hajj to Mecca and find God's guidance there, he will meet Kilir at the edge of the ocean, where his capacity to obey Sunan Benang fails. And it is in the moment of his failure that Kilir gives him access to the most secret truths of God's nature and relationship with the world, such as one finds in the intellectual traditions following the Syattariyah, especially after it had integrated Ibn al-'Arabī's metaphysical framework. The most famous of Java's nine saints absorbs both of these spiritual trajectories in the story of his paradoxical quest to seek what he already has. This quest must push the *wali*'s understanding and austerity to their limits, and Ghazālī's theory and precepts to theirs as well. These means fail, just as his quest is thwarted at the edge of the sea. And in their final failure, he discovers their transcendence.

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